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ABSTRACT

A staff development program based on Hazel Francis' theory of individuality in learning is summarized in this bulletin. The first section provides a brief account of the principles about how individuals learn. Characteristics of the learner and characteristics of learning are outlined. In the next section, the interlinked roles of teacher and learner in the learning process are considered. The following section describes the staff development program, which aimed to help teachers become more effective learners in the classroom in order to improve their teaching for the benefit of learners. The following outcomes are cited: participants' improved ability to analyze and interpret learning and to learn from themselves and their ability to confront curriculum and institutional development issues in a more positive and convincing way. Successful management of errors or mistakes is also discussed. Suggestions for replication of the program follow. A final section describes a case study of one of the participants in the staff development program who planned a series of experimental learning cycles centered on teaching a student how to develop a film. (YLB)

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INDIVIDUALITY IN LEARNING

A Summary Bulletin

November 1990

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***Learning is the 'business' of further education**, yet a great deal of research and development has taken place on curriculum change rather than on learning itself, the central objective for which the curriculum is made.*

It is often assumed that getting a qualification or having completed a course means that learning has taken place. Yet many adults testify that this is not necessarily true. They may say that real learning began for them after formal schooling was over. Why is this?

Hazel Francis, Professor of Educational Psychology at the London University Institute of Education, argues that we pay too little attention to the individuality of the learner. The result is that learners often get the blame for not understanding, when the real problem lies in the mismatch between the mind of the teacher and the mind of the learner. Her work suggests that curriculum teams need to incorporate explicit criteria for quality in learning into their evaluation procedures. Such criteria ought at least to stress the need for learners to:

- *identify and reflect on what they have learned;*
- *demonstrate how a learning task is tackled;*
- *explain why this (and not another) way is the chosen way of doing the task.*

This bulletin summarises a staff development programme developed by Hazel Francis with FEU support which put into practice her theory of individuality in learning. A summary guide for practitioners entitled Individuality in Learning *will be published later this year.*

KEY PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

The research from which the development programme was derived was based on a number of principles about how individuals learn. A detailed description can be found in the full report. A brief account follows here.

Characteristics of the learner

The learner is:

- a unique person

  not a set of measurable behaviours; we all have minds of our own and bring our past experiences to learning, both the successful and the less successful;

- a developing person

  learners' minds are not fixed entities but are continually changing under the impact of their personal experiences;

- a social being

  individuality develops out of experience in a social world. We are all engaged in trying to make sense of life and negotiating ways of dealing with it. Teachers have a special responsibility for taking account of the understandings students bring to tasks and for encouraging the development of those that are educationally desirable.

Characteristics of learning

Learning requires purposeful, active working on a task. A task such as solving a problem, gaining information, acquiring a skill or evaluating an attitude or belief implies personal engagement involving maturation and understanding. Learning is coming to act strategically in accordance with one's estimation and valuing of the task.

- choosing how

  successful learning depends on being able to choose an appropriate strategy from a range of possible strategies for the task in hand; past intellectual 'baggage' may be more or less helpful in this choice depending on the individual's unique history;

- understanding why

  each individual needs to understand why different ways of doing things work best in different circumstances.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

The key principles described above imply that teacher and learner have interlinked roles in the learning process.

Learners must show the teacher:

- how they set about the tasks;
- why they choose that way of doing it.

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Teachers must show the learner:

- how they prefer the task to be done;
- the reason why they are doing it this way rather than any other way.

This means that teachers are learners too. They cannot know in advance what this unique individual's approach will be. In essence, the teacher and the learner need to be able to put themselves in each other's shoes.

THE STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Hazel Francis developed and delivered a 20-day staff development programme which recognised the individuality of learners. It aimed to help teachers become more effective learners in the classroom in order to improve their teaching for the benefit of learners. An adaptation of Kolb's learning cycle was used as a framework for guiding the self-development of the participants.

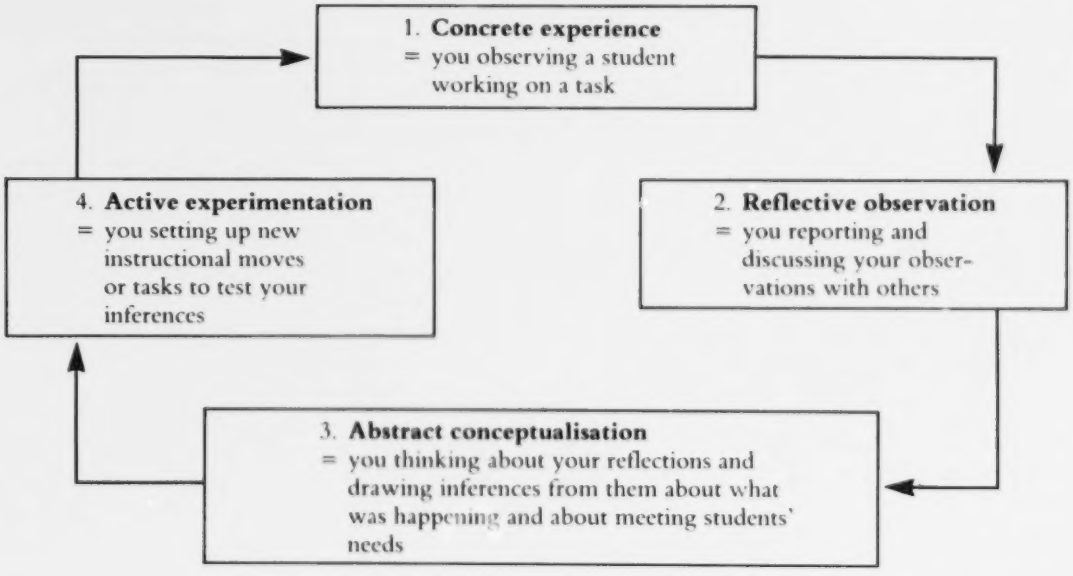
The objective was to realise the key learning concepts described above for all three sets of learners - the **students**, the **participants** and the **staff developers** - but focusing primarily on the **participants**. They were expected to work through a sequence of several cycles, using the experience of one to provide new concrete experience for the next. The course was therefore built around the concrete experience of participants observing their students at work on a learning task, and using their observations to suggest further action. The diagram below suggests the approximate sequence of delivery for each cycle.

The programme began with an exploration of the theme of individuality in learning and induction into the key principles. Observation skills were then developed through on-the-job experience followed by group reflection sessions. In these, attempts were made to interpret students' behaviour and diagnose their learning problems. Important features of the observation tasks for the participants emerged as follows:

- awareness of themselves as the best experts available with regard to their students' learning; avoiding formal observations schedules and extreme 'expert' diagnosis
- focus on short periods of learner behaviour rather than whole sessions
- ensuring that learners were comfortable being observed
- repeated attempts to focus on task-related behaviour and not on general educational needs
- gathering evidence to explain why learners might be trying to tackle the task in one way rather than another
- later reflecting on the evidence with the help of colleagues who acted as a sounding board for emerging hypotheses and issues

Many participants found difficulty at first in detaching themselves emotionally from their students and from their own need to succeed as teachers. They were sometimes wedded to deficit models of the learner which were difficult to drop. Group support was

The staff development cycle


1. Concrete experience
= you observing a student working on a task
2. Reflective observation
= you reporting and discussing your observations with others
3. Abstract conceptualisation
= you thinking about your reflections and drawing inferences from them about what was happening and about meeting students' needs
4. Active experimentation
= you setting up new instructional moves or tasks to test your inferences

invaluable throughout this phase. Constant identification with each other's experience arising from discussion of observations, and the positive valuing approach of the staff developers were important in enabling the participants to overcome their initial difficulties.

Outcomes

Participants markedly improved their ability to analyse and interpret learning and to learn from themselves more effectively in the classroom. They were also able to confront curriculum and institutional development issues in a more positive and convincing way, by being able to argue the case for change based on clear evidence of learners' needs.

One participant summed up her progress:

'I am no longer assuming things as quickly - waiting to watch more closely, looking for indications however small, questioning myself and my reactions. I feel more expert and more confident about what I do and why I do things.'

Managing errors

This research suggests that learning is frustrated if the atmosphere is one in which 'mistakes' are frowned on, since 'mistakes' are in fact seldom random or stupid behaviours, but rather attempts to tackle the task from the point of view of the unique individual, with all their past experience of successful learning and misunderstandings. Participants in the staff development programme found that it was important to:

- distinguish between the type of error where explanatory intervention brings immediate results and the type which signals a need for much more learning;
- choose the right moment to intervene;
- be aware that the time and resources which could be given to working on learners' errors were often greater than supposed;
- identify evidence of earlier misunderstandings which might explain the present behaviour of the learner.

REPLICATING THE STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Factors which should be considered include:

- allowing enough time for individual development - 20 half days were more successful than ten full days over a shorter period of time
- suitable arrangements for release with matching time available for project work on the job for each half day off the job
- recruiting an optimum-sized group of 8-12 with varied specialisms and roles
- ensuring that there is a staff developer who thoroughly understands the key principles and can maintain the integrity of the approach
- marketing the concept to distinguish it clearly from 'individualised learning' (i.e. providing a separate curriculum for each learner)

CASE STUDY : DEVELOPING A FILM

One of the participants on the staff development programme planned a series of experimental learning cycles centred on teaching a chosen student how to develop a film. After ensuring that the student was comfortable with being observed, the teacher:

- demonstrated the process;
- gave out two handouts:
  a) a guide sheet listing the steps involved in the task;
  b) an information graph showing the relationship between development time, type of developer, temperature of developer, speed of film;
- observed the student as the task of developing a film was carried out - with little success as it happened.

The participant reported the observations and discussed them with colleagues. This led to the hypothesis that the information graph caused the student particular problems. The teacher therefore simplified it to include temperature-time correspondence only, and incorporated it into the guide sheet. The hypothesis was tested with these materials in a fresh attempt by the student to develop a film. The demonstration was repeated, and this time the student was more successful, determining the correct development time unaided. When questioned he revealed that he knew what would happen if either the sequence of processes or the time were wrong - i.e. he could identify what he had learned so far. After reflection and discussion the teacher decided to check the quality of the student's learning further by asking him to demonstrate the task again without giving him a thermometer and by cutting up the worksheet into separate unnumbered steps to see whether the student could reconstruct the sequence. The student was able to demonstrate that he had in fact 'really learned' how to do the task.

The use of a learning cycle by the participant entailed setting up cycles for the student. For both of them, **learning how** was linked with **learning why**, for the student in relation to developing the film and for the participant in relation to helping the student learn to develop it.

Further Publications

A summary guide that describes Hazel Francis' work and outlines its relevance to key FE initiatives is available from FEU, priced £3.00. The full report is available on request from FEU's information centre, priced to cover p+p and photocopying.

Information

Anyone interested in further information about this research should contact Pat Hood, Principal Officer, Further Education Unit, 2 Orange Street, London WC2H 7WE, tel. 071 321 0433 or Professor Hazel Francis, Institute of Education, University of London, 25 Woburn Square, London WC1H OAA. Professor Francis is available for consultancy relating to this work.

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